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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [KS](#)
SUBJECT: CHUNG DONG-YOUNG RETAKES HELM OF RULING URI PARTY

Classified By: POL M/C Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Former Minister of Unification Chung Dong-young was elected chairman of the ruling Uri Party on February 18. His election is seen as further proof of his voter appeal and augurs well for his bid to win the party's nomination for the 2007 presidential election. Chung's first challenge, however, will be to drum up support for Uri ahead of the May 31 nation-wide local elections. Given low expectations (most polls have Uri losing all gubernatorial and significant mayoral races), even a single win would add to Chung's luster. His victory statement suggests that Chung's strategy will be to blame the conservative GNP for widespread corruption in regional governments. END SUMMARY.

CHUNG RETAKES HELM OF URI

12. (U) Chung Dong-young, who stepped down as Minister of Unification at the end of 2005, was elected chairman of the ruling Uri Party during a party convention on February 18. Chung, who won the votes of 4,450 out of about 10,000 delegates, beat back a late surge by his nemesis, former Health and Welfare Minister Kim Geun-tae. Kim came in second with 3,847 votes. Chung, Kim, and the next three top vote-getters -- Reps. Kim Hyuck-kyu, Kim Doo-kwan, Cho Bae-sook -- will form the Steering Committee of the Uri Party.

13. (C) Chung's supporters say his victory is proof of Chung's voter appeal and gives him an early advantage in the race to win the Uri Party's nomination for the 2007 presidential election. Indeed, many in the ruling party appear to have voted for Chung in the hope that he can do in May 2006 what he did in April 2004, when he energized young voters and led Uri to a convincing victory in that parliamentary election.

14. (C) Chung's victory speech indicates that he intends to mount an aggressive negative campaign against the main opposition Grand National Party (GNP) in the run-up to the May 31 nation-wide local elections. Polls currently point to another humiliating defeat for Uri, which has been reeling from total losses in both by-elections in 2005. In his victory speech, Chung promised to mount a "fierce struggle" against the GNP, which he blamed for socio-economic polarization in the country. He also blamed the GNP for widespread corruption in regional governments, many of which are led by GNP members, and urged voters to oust incumbent local officials.

15. (C) With about 100 days left before voters go to the polls, Chung has immersed himself in the job of putting together a star-studded slate of candidates. Indeed, President Roh is expected to announce next week a partial Cabinet reshuffle that will see some of his best-known ministers resign in order to run for key posts in May. In addition, Uri -- like the GNP and Democratic Party -- is attempting to form an alliance with former PM Goh Kun, currently a popular presidential hopeful who is expected to be able to draw votes from the Jeolla Provinces.

COMMENT

16. (C) Given low expectations for Uri in the May election, even a single victory would boost Chung's standing within his own party. It is uncertain, however, that that bounce will extend to his standing with the general public. Despite a high-profile tenure as Minister of Unification and universal name recognition, Chung continues to struggle to be taken seriously as presidential material. Latest polls show him trailing far behind GNP Chairwoman Park Geun-hye, Seoul Mayor Lee Myung-bak, and former PM Goh Kun. END COMMENT.

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